

Political Intervention in a National Tourism Event: The Politics of Homecoming Scotland

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to provide insight and analysis into the politics of a government tourism initiative within the geographic context of Scotland. It highlights the catalytic role of key government agencies in channelling investment, energies, events and marketing effort into a nationally focused tourism theme: Homecoming Scotland 2009 (HS09). The paper delves below the public relations veneer of many such activities to uncover the political debates and controversies that may have detracted from the successes of the initiative.

Background

The devolved Government for Scotland was formed in 1999, and is responsible for most of the day-to-day concerns of the people of Scotland, including tourism. In 2007, the Scottish National Party (SNP) was voted into power for the first time (without an overall majority), but in 2011 they were re-elected with an overall majority. One of the SNP's early announcements was its support for a tourism destination marketing initiative called Homecoming Scotland 2009, an idea that was first formed under the previous Labour administration. Although HS09 was a Scottish Government initiative, its day-to-day management was devolved to EventScotland, the national events agency, working with VisitScotland, the national tourism agency.

The main aim of HS09 was to encourage events designed to attract visitors of Scottish birth, descent or affinity to Scotland. Central to HS09 was the leveraging of incoming tourist demand through Scottish links with the Scottish diaspora, estimated at 28m-40m (Eirich and McLaren, 2008). HS09 was a ten-month programme of more than 400 events, with heavily persuasive messages used to entice the Scottish Diaspora, by using words, such as: *reconnect, homeland, native shores, come home*. Although it was developed as a tourism marketing event, it also represented an example of political intervention, which implemented a nation-wide campaign of co-ordinating, promoting and encouraging partnerships. HS09 had a budget of £5.5m, but the real figure was closer to £8.5m (Morrison & Hay, 2010).

Homecoming's Marketing Communication Strategy

Scotland possesses a wealth of attributes, which are regarded as being inalienably Scottish. These are generally not substitutable; and inspire a significant degree of consumer loyalty and motivation to visit. As such, Scotland can be regarded as a niche destination with competitive advantage and enduring retention of unique appeal, strongly positioning it as a tourist destination for the diaspora target market. Given the aim of HS09, it is not

surprising that its marketing campaign content drew heavily on the traditional images of Scotland, and crafted messages evocative of 'returning home to Scotland' (Scottish Government, 2007a). Central to the strategy was the simple, focused slogan 'Homecoming Scotland', cutting through the 'noise' of messages bombarding consumers from competing destinations (Ryan, 2005).

In Scotland, the merit of tourism destination marketing based on traditional images has long been debated. Some brand experts insist that Scotland's brand equity retains resilience, power and positive imagery in the wider world, such as, Worthington (cited in Kemp, 2009: 8) who said: *'Scotland has to maintain and protect the quality of its iconic images – and not allow things to slip or become pure tartan tat'*. Kemp disagrees: *'In Scotland there has been much navel-gazing about the kiltfest that has been HS09 (with) many questioning its validity and portrayal of modern Scotland'*. Thus, opinion is split, 'to icon or not to icon'. Furthermore, Hall (2005) advises that it becomes important to look outside tourism for explanations, which is why the issue of politics, events and tourism needs addressed.

Politics of Events & Tourism in Scotland

'Tourism is highly politicized as, in practice, tourism policies are often vehicles of national political ambitions by countries seeking to harness the economic and political benefits of a buoyant tourism industry' (Page and Connell, 2006; 297)

It can be generalised that the development of tourism in any specific country is a function of the individual government's predisposition towards this type of economic activity, and the extent to which it impacts significantly on a country's society, culture and economy (Hall, 2005). However, within Scotland it is more complex. The primary aim of the SNP is to take Scotland forward to independence, and they plan a referendum on the issue in 2014, the same year as the next Homecoming event. Thus HS09 overtly nationalistic in nature, played perfectly into the political ideology and agenda of the day. There was dissonance within the other political parties and HS09 became highly politicized, seen by some Scottish politicians as a SNP vehicle to persuade the populace of the value of independence. This influenced the degree of political harmony across the political parties. For example, the former Scottish Labour Party leader accused the SNP as being *'more interested in publicizing themselves and Scottish identity in Scotland than in promoting Scotland as a destination to those who live elsewhere. It was never meant to be an internal publicity campaign for Scottishness'* (cited in Hutcheon, 2009). In contrast, the SNP's Tourism Minister's perspective of HS09 was that: *'This year-long celebration will benefit our country in terms of additional tourism, which will contribute to our economy. But it's also an outstanding opportunity to reconnect with the Scottish Diaspora around the world and provide impetus for them to visit their homeland'* (Scottish Government, 2007b). This brings into scrutiny a government's role in serving the collective interests of the population and not the narrow self-interests of their political manifesto (Hall, 2005). Undoubtedly, for the SNP, HS09 held considerable appeal because of its high nationalistic profile both within Scotland for Scots, and for those Scots living outside Scotland with an affinity to their 'homeland'. Additional political (SNP) attractions of HS09 were the potential to generate highly visible economic results in a short period. However, by the start of HS09, a number of individual members of the Scottish Parliament (but not the political parties) were publicly divided over support for HS09. Perhaps the reason for the lack of comments from the main political parties was the degree of support they provided over the years. For example, the Liberal Democrats first announced the initiative in 2003 when they shared power with Labour, and they both supported the event in its planning stages, while the SNP provided ring-fenced funding for its implementation. Evidence of this disquiet of HS09 took the form of:

- Concern within VisitScotland about whether HS09 could meet its stated aims. Scottish Ministers provided additional funds amid fears that HS09 was being ignored by the public (Scottish Government, 2009).
- A TV advert of famous Scots singing Caledonia was not initially intended to be shown outside the UK and Ireland, but this provoked a rapid rethink by Scottish Ministers as HS09 was also aimed at overseas visitors.

- A HS09 poster showing a crowd of stereotypical, white kilted Scots had to be redrawn as it was devoid of any of Scotland's ethnic minorities; this went against the Scottish Government anti-racist campaign.
- Delays to completion of a £21m national Robert Burns Museum meant that tourists did not have this particular motivation to visit the area (McCracken, 2008).
- The company managing the Clan Gathering event went into liquidation (Audit Scotland, 2010).

Conclusions

In terms of conclusions, according to Lederer (2009), HS09:

- will greatly assist with the planning of future major events and national initiatives;
- provided a catalyst for lasting and positive engagement with Scotland's Diaspora around the world;
- generated the most comprehensive database of Scots interest groups around the world; and
- added value to Scotland on the global stage as a place to visit, study, invest or live.

Perhaps the lasting benefit of HS09 is that it has established EventScotland as a major player in event organisation, funding and promotion. HS09 also showed that Scotland could develop additional capacity in event tourism, but how many of the events associated with HS09 are sustainable? Given the willingness on the part of both the private and public sectors to co-operate in the organisation of an international event such as HS09, it did show that Scotland could play on the world stage. Whether this ability to play on the world stage is then hijacked for overtly political purposes, remains unclear.

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